DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 948 SP 038 612

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Brooks, Katherine Walker |
| TITLE | Too Much Fun for Therapy: Therapeutic Recreation as an Intervention Tool with At-Risk Youth. A Series of Solutions and Strategies. |
| INSTITUTION | National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson, SC. |
| REPORT NO | No-11 |
| PUB DATE | 1997-10-00 |
| NOTE | 9p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University, College of Health, Education and Human Development, 205 Martin Street, Clemson, SC 29634-0726. Tel: 864-656-2599; e-mail: ndpc@clemson.edu; Web site: http://www.dropoutprevention.org. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Descriptive (141) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Academic Failure; Creative Art; Early Intervention; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Life; *High Risk Students; Horticulture; Humor; Outdoor Activities; Stress Management; Student Behavior; Student Motivation; *Therapeutic Recreation; Wilderness |
| IDENTIFIERS | Risk Reduction |

ABSTRACT

This publication introduces the concept of therapeutic recreation (TR), illustrating its natural fit into the educational process and its use with at-risk students, and providing resources for further use. Section 1 examines what places a child at risk, focusing on educational goals, student behaviors, and home life. Section 2 defines TR as a professional service that assists people with disabilities and other limitations to be able to achieve an enhanced lifestyle that encompasses functional independence, health, and well-being. Section 3 explains how TR fits into the school setting, noting that recreation in the school setting can be found in four different modes (to teach, to reinforce, to motivate, and to reward). Section 4 discusses TR intervention activities, including horticultural therapy, stress management, creative arts therapies, humor intervention therapy, and outdoor adventure therapy and wilderness programs. For each activity, the publication presents information on targeted goals and benefits, cautions and comments, sample program profiles, and program contacts. Two sidebars offer information on risk factors (related to educational goals, student behaviors, and home life) and protective factors that provide support for the enhancement of resilience. (SM)

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A Series of
# Solutions and Strategies

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER

October 1997 Number 11

## Too Much Fun for Therapy: Therapeutic Recreation as an Intervention Tool With At-Risk Youth

by
Katherine Walker Brooks

### Introduction

*Roadblocks. Today's youth in high-risk situations face a multitude of roadblocks—poverty, teenage pregnancy, violent neighborhoods, alcoholic parents, and issues of self-esteem—that prevent them from setting positive goals and actually accomplishing them.*

*Improved educational methods can only begin to address these difficult problems. Educators who wish to significantly help these students strive for and achieve their goals must develop a wide variety of strategies in order to have a positive impact on their lives. By joining forces with other community youth programs and their methodologies, educators can enhance the protective factors which promote resilience in youth, thus leading them towards a successful future.*

*Purposeful recreation is a strategy from the field of Therapeutic Recreation (TR). This report introduces the concepts of TR, illustrates its natural fit into the educational process, and provides information and resources for further use.*

### What Places a Child at Risk?

Research has shown that, although there are a variety of reasons why young people are considered to be at risk of dropping out of school, there are three general themes which both define and classify those reasons. The first theme incorporates **educational goals**—the student is not achieving the goals of education, not meeting the standards for high school graduation, and not becoming a productive member of society. The second theme involves **student behaviors** that interfere with the educational process. A final theme focuses on the **home life** of a young person—family background or environment may place a student at risk. Garbarino (1995) believes the accumulation of risk factors in any of these three areas can place a child at risk, leading to a failure to realize and reach his or her full potential.

According to Garbarino (1995), every child is at risk, but what are the factors which can determine who will fail and who will succeed? There are many risk factors that contribute to placing a student at risk, and they are found in many settings in a child's life: the home, the school, and the community. In these same settings, protective factors can exist to overcome the negative impact of risk factors. The charts on page 2 (adapted from Allen, 1996) are good indicators of common risk factors seen in students as well as some of the protective factors that can assist in building resilience.

Garbarino (1995) believes that although certain risk factors cannot be completely eliminated, providing parallel opportunity factors, or protective factors, can help develop social support systems and coping mechanisms that allow youth to overcome their environment. There are many ways that resilience through protective factors can be obtained through the use of purposeful recreation. This is exactly what Therapeutic Recreation has to offer youth in at-risk situations.

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## Risk Factors

**Related to Educational Goals**

- Hopelessness
- Lack of confidence
- School failure
- External locus of control
- Lack of school/community linkages
- Non-English speaking home
- Little education

**Related to Student Behaviors**

- Behavior/discipline problems
- Aggressiveness
- Inability to cope with stress
- Low self-esteem
- Substance abuse
- Lack of social skills
- Shyness or hypersensitivity
- Cultural alienation

**Related to Home Life**

- Poverty/low socioeconomic status
- Unemployment
- Inadequate housing
- Lack of resources
- High level of family stress/conflict/violence
- Lack of parental involvement
- High mobility

## Protective Factors

These factors provide support for the enhancement of resilience, thus promoting positive development of young people.

- Easy temperament
- Autonomous
- Adaptable and flexible
- Positive outlook
- Healthy expectations
- Self-efficacy
- Self-discipline
- Internal locus of control
- Problem-solving skills
- Socially adept
- Tolerance of people
- Self-confidence

Schools and communities can help produce those factors in youth by the following activities:

- Access to adequate social services
- Life-skills training
- Leisure education
- Quality health care
- Partnerships between service providers
- Flexible service providers
- Stress management
- Close relationship with one parent
- Group cohesion (family)
- Mentoring/support network
- "Loving discipline" structure

# What Is Therapeutic Recreation?

Therapeutic Recreation (TR) has been defined as a professional service that assists people with disabilities and other limitations to be able to achieve an enhanced lifestyle that encompasses functional independence, health, and well-being. Through treatment, leisure education, and recreation participation, TR is practiced in clinical, community, and residential settings to enhance the quality of life. TR is able to use treatment and leisure educational activities to facilitate personal growth and development as well as learning experiences.

There are a few terms that are commonly used in this field that may need some clarification. This type of therapy is anything but laying on a couch and analyzing your childhood; it is a hands-on approach that uses **activities** to facilitate teaching new skills and improving overall life satisfaction. Most people do not think that recreation and play are a constructive use of time. Terms such as "leisure" and "recreation" conjure up images of free time and lack of responsibility. TR offers **purposeful** recreation. Every activity has a desired outcome, effect, or lesson within its structure to accomplish a predetermined goal or objective.

There are two terms which are used often in TR: leisure and play. Leisure is defined as any freely chosen activity that requires some mastery or knowledge of skills, provides an escape from routine or boring situations, offers a challenge, and results in enjoyment. Play is a facilitating activity that promotes personal growth and education through both structured and unstructured purposeful recreational activities.

TR has primarily been based within a clinical setting and its benefits are well-documented. There are also community



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agencies that work within the same framework that can partner with educators and schools or, at the very least, teach them new techniques and skills.

## How Does Therapeutic Recreation Fit Into a School Setting?

Recreation for the school setting can be found in four different modes: to teach, to reinforce, to motivate, and to reward.

Recreational activities that are used to teach usually involve structure and instruction. This hands-on approach to learning can easily be incorporated into the existing school curriculum by providing activities that demonstrate an idea or concept. For example, by taking a group of elementary students out on the playground, a lesson can be found in measurements and discovering angles. This can even be taken further to assess what degree of angle is best suited for a particular strength or type of equipment. Students can also perform a small scale archaeology project that has been prearranged by the educator to learn how to identify objects (rocks, shells, and fossils) and determine when they probably first existed.

Activities that **reinforce** are very easy, and the students love the break from the normal routine. This can be as simple as using any type of board game, where in order for a team to advance they must answer a review question. It can also be made more difficult by making the games complicated and funny in addition to reviewing the material. It all depends upon how much material needs to be covered during a class period or review session.

Sometimes finding the **motivating** aspects for certain students seems to be impossible. One of the greatest advantages of TR is that it is fun. This in itself serves as a motivator for almost all students. Sometimes the best learning experiences come when you do not realize you are learning. By using purposeful recreation, that can be accomplished. TR also offers an opportunity for learning without the structures of the traditional classroom. This makes learning new and exciting, thus providing an additional motivator.

The most familiar form of using recreation in the classroom is as a **reward**. It is common to find in almost every classroom some extra activity available to students upon finishing their work early. This may include the options of reading a book, playing with the computer, or playing an educational board game. It is important to make additional learning experiences available to all students, not just those who finish their work early; otherwise, average or below average achieving students are excluded.

The following TR intervention activities provide good examples which can be used to teach, reinforce, motivate, and reward. Some of them can also be used to do any combination of the four. In addition, these activities can also assist in developing the necessary protective factors students need to overcome various risk factors in their lives. Each intervention will provide a brief explanation of what the activity involves as well as information pertaining to the targeted goals and benefits to the students, a sample program in current use, and a contact resource for more detailed information.

## Therapeutic Recreation Intervention Activities

### Horticultural Therapy

Horticultural therapy uses plants and nature to hold students' attention and interest while learning. Horticulture involves working with all kinds of plants in many types of settings. Generally, a horticultural therapy program includes outdoor gardening, landscaping, indoor gardening, classroom instruction, flower arranging, and crafts.

Plants provide a "safe" facilitator for learning. They will not bite or make hasty judgments, yet are extremely responsive and productive even with minimum care. This allows the student gardener to begin to feel successful, nurturing, and creative. This type of activity makes it easy for all individuals to focus on their strengths instead of their weaknesses.

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**Targeted Goals and Benefits**

- improve self-esteem
- increase attention span
- develop sense of responsibility
- practice leadership skills
- improve social skills
- experience delayed gratification
- incorporate educational curriculum components – biology, ecology, math, social studies

Careful planning should be completed before this type of program is implemented. Concerns of accessibility for all population groups should be addressed along with any equipment that may be needed (i.e., garden hose and spigot nearby).

**Sample Program Profile**

Sprouting Wings is an after-school beautification project designed for seven-to ten-year-olds to build self-esteem. The Clemson University horticulture department runs the program with two groups of elementary students for a once-a-week after-school project for four months in the spring. This allows the students to witness plant growth from a dormant stage to blooming. College students serve as part of a class to provide instruction and guidance to the children while they are interacting with peers and nature at the South Carolina Botanical Gardens. At the end of the program, a special event is held for the students, their parents, and the volunteers to recognize all of the accomplishments.

**Program Contact Resource**

Amy Craddock, Director
Sprouting Wings Program
Clemson University
266 Poole Agricultural Center
Clemson, SC 29634
(864) 656-3410
adabbs@clemson.edu

## Stress Management

Stress management is a program that provides students and adults with the necessary coping skills to handle daily stress appropriately. Often students in at-risk environments fail to learn skills for handling stress and may react inappropriately during and after stressful situations. Common behaviors seen are oversensitivity, such as excessive crying, violent or destructive behaviors, and mock indifference. This type of program would not only teach techniques to handle stress, but conflict resolution skills and personal responsibility for actions. In some cases, relaxation therapy may be employed when appropriate.

Students experience differing levels of stress during a normal day, and often it is due to being unprepared for the challenges of daily living. One of the biggest advantages a student can acquire are what recreation therapists call life skills. These involve such skills as knowing how to write a check, apply for a job, speak effectively, and search for community resources and support in order to be successful and productive. By mastering these skills, students will be able to eliminate some of the stress and pressure they feel from their day-to-day lives by knowing what to do to be successful.

**Targeted Goals and Benefits**

- increase conflict resolution skills
- improve coping skills
- make accurate situation evaluation
- develop time management skills
- increase self-confidence
- improve communication skills
- develop a sense of responsibility
- improve life skills

Learning life skills is certainly important, and, luckily for educators, they can be taught by a variety of people. On the other hand, relaxation techniques are usually used only by a counselor or psychologist and should only be performed by an experienced therapist. Nevertheless, a basic concept such as brief "time out" periods can be used whenever necessary to either calm down or reevaluate a situation or conflict.

**Sample Program Profile**

There are many programs that can assist educators in conflict resolution. One of these programs is the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP). This particular program focuses on group relations and is a collaboration between the New York City Public Schools and educators to teach social responsibility. The object is to show youth that they have other options for dealing with conflict other than passivity or aggression. It also includes training in areas such as increasing understanding and appreciation of their own and other cultures, providing the youth with skills to make

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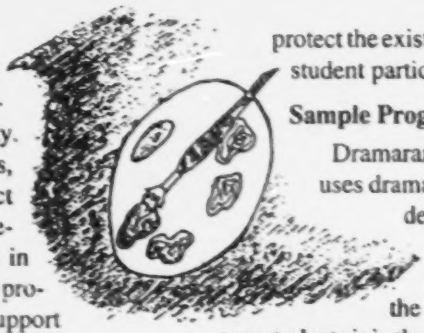
real-life choices, and empowering each youth with the knowledge of how they can use their personal strengths to play a powerful role in creating a more peaceful society. RCCP offers a training course for educators, classroom instruction in creative conflict resolution, and classroom visits by staff development consultants to assist teachers in curriculum implementation. They can also provide classroom demonstrations and other support services (Rogers, 1994).



**Program Contact Resources**

Linda Lantieri, Director
Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)
RCCP National Center
163 Third Avenue, Room 103
New York, NY 10003
(212) 387-0225

## Creative Arts Therapies

Creative arts therapies use the humanities to discover personal strengths while providing a safe and fun environment to practice valuable life skills. Through the use of music, dance, art, and drama, students gain skills they can use for life. Humanities that are performed and practiced within groups teach leadership skills, self-discipline, and teamwork while they build group cohesion.

Some of these creative arts can also be used to educate. For example, drama can be used to teach younger students an appreciation of theatre and literature, the dangers of drugs or peer pressure, or as a medium for building conflict resolution techniques.

**Targeted Goals and Benefits**

- increase self-esteem
- improve self-expression
- recognize personal talents
- provide opportunities for relaxation
- use problem-solving skills
- develop teamwork
- build time management skills
- enhance self-discipline
- develop creative thinking
- build leadership skills
- incorporate educational curriculum components– science, health, language arts, art, music

Some forms of the humanities are already found within the traditional school curriculum. It is important to not only protect the existing programs but encourage and support student participation.

**Sample Program Profile**

Dramarama is a creative therapy program that uses drama as its medium. It is a three-week camp designed to educate and motivate high school students. The students create and perform their own short plays. During the third week of the program, the elementary students join the group and the high school students serve as counselors and assist the younger students in the creation and production of their own skits.

**Program Contact Resource**

Boyce M. Lawton, III
Director of Institutional Research and Evaluation
Wofford College, CPO 30
429 North Church Street
Spartanburg, SC 29303-3663
(864) 597-4170
lawtonbm@wofford.edu

## Humor Intervention Therapy

Humor intervention uses everything from gags to spontaneous play. Researchers have found that the benefits of humor can be accomplished through a simple smile to a soul-filled laugh. Many educational benefits can be accomplished through humor. Often, society has relayed the message that learning is not fun or humorous but rather, difficult work. That may be true in some cases, but when working with special populations (including at-risk youth) the conventional methods do not work. Humor allows the classroom to be fun and exciting. Thus, the students are paying attention and learning something at the same time. An added benefit is that when using humor in the classroom, the opportunity to teach sensitivity and awareness of personal differences to students often presents itself.

**Targeted Goals and Benefits**

- increase group cohesion
- reduce social distance in the classroom
- improve communication skills
- increase social skills
- reduce stress
- increase coping skills
- relieve anxiety
- incorporate educational curriculum components – language arts, research



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If humor is used negatively it can cause more damage than good. Many types of humor such as sarcasm or embarrassment are not appropriate for the classroom and would prove to be detrimental to teaching and building resilience.

**Sample Program Profile**

Sarah Kelley (1994) uses humor to integrate Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking by using clowning. Each of the six levels of thinking is taught as a separate unit lesson. It starts with **knowledge** and learning the types of humor and types of clowns. The next level is **comprehension** which was checked by having the students identify clowns through pictures and videos. The third and fourth levels are **application** and **analysis**. This was accomplished by the students creating a class book of puns and riddles for application and, for analysis, each student joined a clown group to study a character. This new information then led to the fifth level of thinking: **synthesis**. The students introduced the clown they wished to become to the class and performed a brief act in full costume based upon the type and character of that particular clown. The last stage is **evaluation**. Here the students discussed their experiences and evaluated themselves over the course of the entire program.

**Program Contact Resource**

Ms. Sarah Kelley
Center for Creative Learning
Rockwood School District
265 Old State Road
Ellisville, MO 63021
(314) 207-2579

## Outdoor Adventure Therapy and Wilderness Programs

Outdoor adventure therapy and wilderness programs are designed to use the challenges of nature to teach. By offering students the opportunity to meet and rise above rigorous challenges and risks in a camp setting, they learn invaluable skills like reasoning, overcoming fear, problem solving, and teamwork. The camp experience involves many of the basic survival skills such as initial planning of supplies, setting up camp, and collecting and preparing food.

This type of program usually involves a camp setting but is not limited to the full camping experience. It can be performed during a weekend retreat or as an after-school program depending upon the facilities available to your school or organization. A typical program includes activities such as high or low ropes courses, team-building exercises, feats of physical strength and endurance, and trust and problem-solving games or activities.

**Targeted Goals and Benefits**

- improve problem-solving skills
- increase cooperation skills
- increase self-esteem
- enhance team building
- develop leadership skills
- increase physical fitness
- incorporate educational curriculum components – earth and life science, mathematics, ecology

**Cautions and Comments**

These activities almost always require a certified instructor or at least an experienced instructor. The ropes courses, in particular, require a certified instructor to operate and teach at all times. It is extremely important to check that all personnel performing any type of outdoor or wilderness instruction are appropriately qualified due to the physical nature and risk of some of the activities. Also, because of the physical demands, it is wise to prepare for and accommodate any special needs that the students may have while performing these activities.

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**Sample Program Profile**

The Eckerd Wilderness Educational System (EWES) is an example of an outdoor wilderness program; however, it is also a school and targets troubled youth and their families with an alternative behavior modification program. EWES has its own curriculum and offers a unique approach to education. The youth actually live at an Eckerd camp for the duration of their treatment program and the families participate in treatment activities during visitation. It uses aspects of experiential instruction, group therapy, role modeling, wilderness survival training, extended wilderness trips, and a transition and after-care component.

**Program Contact Resource**

Eckerd Family Youth Alternatives, Inc.
100 N. Starcrest Drive
PO Box 7450
Clearwater, FL 34618-7450
1-800-554-4357
(There are twenty-eight locations nationwide.)

## Conclusion

Educators seeking to provide successful school experiences for youth at risk are finding new allies in the ever-expanding prevention field. Strategies developed in Therapeutic Recreation are now seen to be effective in enhancing the protective factors which increase a child's potential for school and life success. Adaptable to an educational environment, TR provides the educator with new approaches to meeting the needs of those students who come from a variety of high-risk backgrounds.

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## Additional Information Sources

Information and resources can be found within your own community; contact your local community agencies. Many community recreation centers have after-school recreation programs designed to provide opportunities for students to improve academics, social and emotional coping skills, or leisure skills. Local colleges and universities are often willing to form partnerships with schools to provide services to the community. This is an ideal situation because every one wins: Colleges have the opportunity to use their students in the field providing real-life experiences, while elementary or secondary schools have a fountain of knowledge as well as volunteers available to them.

Some states may have a rural recreation program through a local college or state agency. Another source to consider is a rehabilitation center. Most facilities have an activity director or recreation therapist on staff. If it is a small facility, they may share the therapist with a neighboring facility.

**Horticultural therapy**

Local garden clubs can make excellent intergenerational partners.

**Stress Management**

Children's Creative Response to Conflict (CCRC)
Box 271, 523 North Broadway
Nyack, NY 10960
(914) 358-4601

CCRC is a national network that helps children learn to cooperate, communicate, and deal creatively with conflict. They also publish teaching materials, parenting materials, and activities designed to assist adults and children in experiencing new ways to solve conflicts.

**Creative Arts Therapies**

Contact local school district or arts council for art, music, and dance programs.

**Humor Therapy**

America Association for Therapeutic Humor
1441 Shermer Avenue, Suite 110
Northbrook, IL 60062

**Outdoor Adventure Therapy and Wilderness Programs**

Contact local camp programs in your community.

American Camping Association
Bradford Woods
5040 State Road 67N
Martinsville, IN 46151

Colorado Outward Bound School
845 Pennsylvania Street
Denver, CO 80203

Success Oriented Achievement Realized (S.O.A.R.)
PO Box 388
Balsam, NC 28707-0388
(704) 456-3435

This camp program targets learning-disabled and ADD students. Special emphasis is placed on developing self-confidence, social skills, problem-solving techniques, a willingness to attempt new challenges, and the motivation that comes from successful goal orientation.

**General TR Resources**

American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA)
PO Box 15215
Hattiesburg, MS 39403

Formed in 1984 to address the needs of professionals primarily working in health and human-care facilities. This association emphasizes the treatment and education functions of the field.

National Therapeutic Recreation Society (NTRS)
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, VA 22302

The national professional organization for recreation therapists publishes the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal.*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Katherine Walker Brooks** received a Master's in Therapeutic Recreation from Clemson University in 1997. She served as graduate assistant at the National Dropout Prevention Center from 1995 to 1996.

*James Walker, a student at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC, provided the illustrations for this publication.*

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) is a partnership of concerned leaders—representing business, educational and policy interests, and Clemson University—created to significantly reduce America's dropout rate. NDPC is committed to meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations by helping to shape school environments which ensure that all youth receive the quality education to which they are entitled. NDPC provides technical assistance to develop, demonstrate, and evaluate dropout prevention efforts; conducts action research; and collects, analyzes, and disseminates information about efforts to improve the schooling process.



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